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ABSTRACT

Henry James, the nineteenth-century American novelist, also served on occasion as a theatre critic. Between 1875 and 1890 he reviewed several productions in Boston, New York, London, and Paris for "Atlantic Monthly" and other periodicals. The reviews are of interest because of James' high standards regarding acting and his often devasting comments about famous actors. James held three basic principles about acting: it is an art, its realism should be tempered with style, and it should be vocally effective. Among the actors whom he criticized were Ellen Terry and Henry Irving, whom he denounced as amateurs, and Sarah Bernhardt, whom he condemned as a professional of the worst kind--not an artist but a publicist. James praised the French actor, Constant Coquelin, as the complete professional, the "Balzac of actors." (Author/RN)

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HENRY JAMES ON THE ART OF ACTING

It is unusual for a distinguished novelist to function as a theatre critic. It seems unlikely that the novelist Henry James, so concerned with literary nuance and refined sensitivity, would care to write about the efforts of popular nineteenth century actors. Yet between 1875 and 1890 James reviewed a number of theatre performances in Boston, New York, London and Paris for readers of Atlantic Monthly, Century Magazine, The Nation and other periodicals. In his reviews James considered all aspects of theatre production but was especially fascinated by the art of acting.

James's theatre criticism is distinguished by its heightened sensitivity to aesthetics in acting. Ironically, this was the very quality which later made James repelled by actors in the backstage situation of rehearsals. As a would-be playwright between 1890 and 1895, James could not learn from contact with actors. Instead, he only suffered through, in his words, the "odious process of practical dramatic production."[1] Both in James's attitude toward actors and in his unsuccessful play-writing, what George Bernard Shaw called "James's intellectual fastidiousness" remained "untouched by the resurgent energy and wilfulness of the new spirit."[2]

Nevertheless, James' theatre reviews are of some interest today. They enlighten us about his high but narrowly defined

principles of acting. They entertain us with his often devastating comments on famous actors of the time.

James's knowledge of acting was based upon his observation of American, English, French and Italian actors. As a boy in New York he followed the performances of William Burton, Laura Keene, Lester Wallack and other favorites. Edwin Booth and Joseph Jefferson impressed him as particularly important American actors. James knew the work of all major English actors from Charles Kean's presentation of Henry the Eighth through the careers of Henry Irving and Ellen Terry. It was on American and English stages, also, that James most frequently saw the three greatest Italian actors of his time: Salvini, Ristori and Duse. But it was the work of French actors in the Comédie-Française--of Got, Delauney and Coquelin--that James spent the most time studying and for which he maintained his greatest enthusiasm. This passion for French theatre accounts for much in the principles of acting upon which James based his criticism.

There are three principles James considered fundamental to good acting. The first of these is "the lesson that acting is an art."[3] James believed that acting should be considered, by actors and public alike, as a serious profession, requiring study and dedication, and admitting of nothing accidental in its performance. James found a marked contrast between the English and theFrench ability to regard acting as an art.

He saw the decline of good acting on the English stage as a result of so many "victims of leisure" taking refuge in "playing at histrionics." Unlike the French stage, where the actor's art was still considered something of a "mystery," a thing of technical secrets, of special knowledge, "on the English stage the evidences of training--of a school, a discipline, a body of science-- were conspicuous by their absence."[4] This insistence upon conscious artistry in acting, like James's attitude toward his own art of fiction, was completely professional. He might have said, with the professional artist in his short story The Real Thing, "the ruling passion of my life was the detestation of the amateur."[5]

James's second principle of acting stemmed directly from his first: "acting is an art and that art is style" ("Coquelin," p. 407). He first praised the quality of style in acting in his 1875 review of Madame Ristori's playing in Boston. Her "great merit," he wrote, was that "she has style."

> The quality is so rare upon the English-speaking stage--especially, it is painful to observe, among the actresses--that one should make the most of any suggestion of it. It is the result in Madame Ristori of a combination of fine elements--her admirable stage presence, her incomparable language, and the peculiarly

> masterly way--the firmness, the certainty, the assurance--with which she deals with her part.... the whole manner in which the part is "composed to the eye" ...[is] full of style ....It is realism ... of a downright pattern; but it is realism harmonized by a great artistic instinct.[6]

One should note that James's emphasis upon style--which might be interpreted as technical control or aesthetic composition in all aspects of acting--does not rule out the need for realism or spontaneity of expression. James praised the "truthfulness" and "psychological quality" of actors with such different styles as Tommaso Salvini and Joseph Jefferson.[7] James believed in realism as the essence of good acting, but he stressed that such realism, to be aesthetically effective, should be only suggested and be tempered by the quality of style. This is the very theme of his The Real Thing, in which the pair of literal aristocrats are less convincing than the talented Miss Churm whose performance as an aristocrat "was simply suggestive; but it was a word to the wise" (p.22). To James, life is literal until art makes it "The Real Thing."

The third of James's three major principles of acting emphasized what he considered the most essential element of a good actor's technical equipment--a clear, pleasing, expressive voice. For

James, "the basis, the prime condition, of acting is the art of finished and beautiful utterance--the art of speaking, of saying, of diction, as the French call it."[8] James judged acting largely by its ability to communicate to him orally the ideas of the playwright being presented. The play was the most important single element in the theatre, and the actor's main job was to transmit the playwright's words to the ears of discriminating listeners. In this regard, it is revealing that James, after making a "conscientious pilgrimage" to all the theatres of London, described for his readers, not the plays he had seen, but "the plays I have listened to."[9] James found that the modern American theatre, in contrast to the French, greatly neglected this oral aspect of acting: "On our own stage to <u>say</u> things is out of fashion." The actor has only "to <u>do</u> them, with a great reënforcement of chairs and tables, of traps and panoramas and other devices." The modern actor has lost the art of oral delivery, partly because the playwrights provide him with little to say, and partly because "the stage-carpenter and the dress-maker" have relieved him of the responsibility of being able to speak well; with the unfortunate result that "the ear of the public, that exquisite critical sense . . . has simply ceased to respond from want of use" ("Coquelin," p.410).

The application of James's three basic principles of acting--that acting should be an art; that its realism should be tempered with style; and that it should, above all, be orally effective--is best seen in his criticism of those actors on whom he wrote at greatest length, the English team of Henry Irving and Ellen Terry and the French pair of Constant Coquelin and Sarah Bernhardt. The first two he denounced as amateurs; the third he praised as the complete professional; the fourth he condemned as a professional of the wrong kind.

James considered Ellen Terry's acting "amateurish" rather than artistic. She was "aesthetic," but only after the fashion of the "new enthusiasm" which "takes a strong interest in aesthetic furniture, archeological attire, and blue china." She had a great deal of "angular grace" but a "total want of what the French call chic." She completely lacked "the large manner, the style and finish, of a comédienne." And perhaps most serious of all, her voice had "a sort of monotonous husky thickness which . . . gravely interferes with the modulation of many of her speeches."[10] The "personality" of Ellen Terry was popular in England and America for over twenty years, but by the high standards of Henry James she was "simply not an actress."[11]

Henry Irving's acting provoked even less enthusiasm in the criticism of James. From his first review of Irving, in 1875, James considered him an "amateur" who needed training in a

dramatic school like the Conservatoire of Paris. Without such training, Irving as Macbeth, was merely "a spare, refined man, of an unhistrionic--of a rather sedentary--aspect, and with a thick, unmodulated voice . . . grappling in a deliberate and conscientious manner with a series of great tragic points."[12] Seven years later James, still musing about artistic training for Irving, asked, "would a training-school have, for instance, prevented Mr. Henry Irving, who has for some time past been offering us such a Romeo as we never dreamed of?" This Irving-Terry Romeo and Juliet, continued James's review, was as inadequately acted as any of their Shakespearian productions. It was no indication of Irving's reputed intelligence as a manager "that he himself should play the hero, or that he should entrust the girlish Juliet to the large, the long, the mature Miss Terry . . . . she is not Juliet; on the contrary! She is too voluminous, too deliberate, too prosaic, too English, too unversed in the utterance of poetry. How little Mr. Irving is Romeo it is not worthwhile even to attempt to declare." The continued popular success of the inartistic Irving remained for James "the best possible proof of the absence of taste, of criticism, of knowledge, of a standard, on the part of the public."[13]

If Irving signally failed to meet James's tests of a great actor, Coquelin succeeded perhaps as well as any mortal could. James praised Coquelin with more enthusiasm than any

other actor, even other French actors, mentioned in his dramatic criticism. James first saw Coquelin in 1870 at the Comédie-Française, and he followed his career during its remaining thirty-nine years. By 1879 James had already elevated Coquelin to the top rank of his estimation: "There was a time when I thought Got the first of living actors, and Got is certainly still a consummate, a superb comedian. But as Coquelin has advanced in life and in his art, he has attained a command of his powers and developed an intelligence of the whole dramatic mystery which place him, to my sense, almost alone. His variety, his versatility, the extent of his scale, are extraordinary."[14] Coquelin was James's best example of his principles that acting should be an art and that an actor, in any type of role, should exhibit to the discerning critic a technical finish or style in his playing. If anything, Coquelin erred in this very respect of style, for the only defect James ever mentioned in Coquelin's talent was "a certain hardness, an almost inhuman perfection of surface" ("Coquelin," p.413). But this excess of artistry James found easier to forgive than the lack of emotional, physical and vocal control he noted in most actors. Of Coquelin's oral effectiveness, James had nothing but praise. He recalled Coquelin as "Thouvenin" in the last act of Denise delivering "the longest speech in the French drama" and giving it "life, light, color, movement, variety, interest, even excitement." Such a success, said James, was "the highest triumph of the actor's art, because it belongs to the very foundation, and to the most human part of it" ("Coquelin," p. 410). Of all actors, Coquelin best demonstrated for James the work of a true artist, work in which the accidental and the chaotic could play

no part; and in recognition of Coquelin's skill in blending realism with art, James paid him the high compliment of comparing Coquelin's art of acting with James's own intricate one of the novel. The way Coquelin worked through long and elaborate parts reminded James "of the manner in which the writer of a 'psychological' novel (when he knows how to write as well as M. Coquelin knows how to act) builds up a character, in his supposedly uncanny process--with touch added to touch, line to line, and a vision of his personage breathing before him. M. Coquelin is really the Balzac of actors" ("Coquelin," p. 412).

It may be appropriate to present James's reactions to Sarah Bernhardt last because he considered her the most modern of all the potentially great actors he saw and heard. The problem she represented for him may be even more evident today with our increased kinds and uses of news media. James, who detested the amateur, sensed in Bernhardt that the real opposite of professional is not amateur but an inartistic kind of professionalism. He saw Bernhardt as something of a prophetic figure whose career foreshadowed the twentieth century tendency of professional artists to change into professional publicists.

James was extremely critical of the English and American publics for their inordinate interest in the "personalities" of actors, but he was even more critical of those actors who encouraged such adulation by inartistic means. Of the latter, Sarah Bernhardt was his outstanding example. In 1876, in Paris, James had considered Bernhardt one of the promising young artists of the Comédie-Française.[15] But three years later, when the French company visited London and Bernhardt was "taken up" with

ecstacy by British society, James saw her success as that of "a celebrity, pure and simple,"[16] and not that of an artist. He thought of her no longer as a potentially great artist but, instead, as a very limited one: ". . . it cannot be said that she is a consummate actress, or even what the French call a comédienne. She is far from belonging to the race of Rachel and Desclée . . . those concentrated and serious artists." James felt Bernhardt owed her success not to real acting ability but to her "advertising genius; she may, indeed, be called the muse of the newspaper." To the big news that Bernhardt, on the basis of her success in London, had resigned her place with the Comédie and planned a tour of America, James responded that she would undoubtedly triumph: "She is too American not to succeed in America. The people who have brought to the highest development the arts and graces of publicity will recognize a kindred spirit in a figure so admirably adapted for conspicuity."

The "Balzac of actors" versus "the muse of the newspaper"--in such vivid metaphors, referring to his own art of literature, Henry James made clear his sternly aesthetic attitude toward the art of acting.

NOTES

[1]Letter to Henrietta Reubell, Dec. 31, 1894, in The Letters of Henry James, ed. Percy Lubbock (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920), I, 226.

[2]Dramatic Opinions and Essays (New York: Brentano's, 1906), I, 181.

[3]"Coquelin," Century Magazine, 33 (1887), 407.

[4]"The London Theatres," The Nation, 28 (1879), 400.

[5]The Real Thing and Other Tales (New York: Macmillan, 1893), p. 11.

[6]"Madame Ristori," The Nation, 20 (1875), 195.

[7]"Tommaso Salvini," Atlantic Monthly, 51 (1883), 385.

[8]"The London Theatres," The Nation, 28 (1879), 400.

[9]"The London Theatres," The Galaxy, 23 (1877), 670.

[10]"The London Theatres," The Nation, 28 (1879), 400.

[11]"The London Theatres," The Galaxy, 23 (1877), 670.

[12]"Mr. Henry Irving's Macbeth," The Nation, 21 (1875), 340.

[13]"London Pictures and London Plays," Atlantic Monthly, 50 (1882), 261-62.

[14]"The Comédie-Française in London," The Nation, 29 (1879), 73.

[15]"The Théâtre Français," in French Poets and Novelists (London: Macmillan, 1904), pp. 340-44.

[16]"The Comédie-Française in London," p. 73. The remaining Bernhardt quotations are from the same source.